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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 KATHMANDU 002264

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SUBJECT: NEPAL: ARMY PLAN TO INITIATE INDUSTRIAL SECURITY FORCE

REF: KATHMANDU 2169

Classified By: AMB. MICHAEL E. MALINOWSKI. REASON: 1.5 (B,D).

SUMMARY

¶1. (C) In a November 21 meeting with Ambassadors and Nepali business leaders, Chief of Army Staff (COAS) Gen. Pyar Jung Thapa announced plans to form a 3,000-man "industrial security force" within the Royal Nepal Army (RNA). If approved by the Cabinet, this new force, which he expects to be operational with the next six months, will be dedicated to providing security for sensitive business and industrial operations. The General also discussed the possible creation of "village defense forces," or local militias, in remote areas, a proposal not favored by other senior military leaders. End summary.

INDUSTRIAL SECURITY FORCE ANNOUNCED

¶2. (SBU) On November 21 Chief of Army Staff (COAS) Gen. Pyar Jung Thapa briefed business leaders, heads of binational Chambers of Commerce, and foreign ambassadors on plans to form an "industrial security force" within the Royal Nepal Army (RNA). The mission of the new unit will be to provide security to sensitive business and industrial establishments. Thapa proposed that 3,000 of the 10,000 new RNA recruits will form the core of the new force. The new force could be trained and ready for deployment by May. The proposal to form the force is now before the Cabinet, he said.

¶3. (SBU) According to the proposal, the RNA will provide the manpower, training and equipment for the force, Thapa said, but private businesses benefiting from the enhanced protection will be expected to provide food, uniforms, and housing for the troops. Thus all new business projects should factor security costs into their budgets, he cautioned. (Note: He did not provide estimated annual costs for maintaining the force. End note.) Despite being tied down with the tasks of providing security to 75 district headquarters, sensitive infrastructure like airports and hydroelectric plants, and key personnel and facilities within the capital, the RNA must take on this additional role because the civil police and Armed Police Force (APF) are unable to do so at this time. The RNA does not enjoy performing such "peripheral duties," but recognizes its duty to do so, Thapa said, noting the Army's patrolling of customs checkpoints had resulted in a 30-40 percent increase in revenue collection. The RNA will begin the task of protecting businesses; the civil police and APF will then pick up their share of the burden later as their capability improves. The RNA can advise investors and entrepreneurs on site selection for new projects, he added. Ambassador Malinowski suggested that the RNA designate a point of contact for businessmen with questions or concerns regarding security. Thapa agreed to do so.

VILLAGE DEFENSE FORCES

¶4. (C) The military alone, stretched as it is with "peripheral duties" and maintaining security at key sites, cannot counter the insurgency, Thapa warned. The APF is not yet adequately trained, and is "only taking up resources right now." The RNA is thus considering developing "a new strategy" of employing "village defense forces" to supplement security in remote areas. Villagers would be trained and armed with shotguns and muskets. The villagers would be the first line of defense under this strategy, while the RNA would provide "a reaction force." Members of the new militias could also provide information on Maoist activities and plans so the RNA could mount large-scale attacks. For this strategy to work, formation of the militias must also be linked up with solid rural development plans for these areas, Thapa noted. The UK Ambassador suggested that his government might be able to provide some experts on civil defense forces to assist with this strategy.

HOW ARE THE MAOISTS DOING?

15. (C) The Maoists' savage tactics have eroded their erstwhile popular support, Thapa declared. Only about 20-30 percent of their current forces are "hard-core," he estimated, while another 50 percent may have been conscripted forcibly into their ranks. Rural areas have been depopulated as one-time residents flee forced conscription. The Maoists' new strategy is to target schoolchildren for recruitment, Thapa said.

16. (C) The RNA controls the headquarters of all 75 districts. Outside district headquarters, however, is another matter, Thapa acknowledged. Some districts, such as Rolpa, are almost completely Maoist. He speculated that the Maoists may be attempting to move south of their original power base in Rukum-Rolpa-Jajarkot, where most of the people are ethnic Magar, toward Dang, where much of the population are disaffected Tharus and Kamaiyas, the former bonded laborer class. The Maoists appear better armed than before, he continued, and undoubtedly have better weapons and training than the civilian police. In the battle in Jumla, for example (Reftel), they fired 81 mm mortars at close range. The insurgents occupied civilian homes in their effort to take the district headquarters, making it difficult for the RNA to return fire. Nonetheless, the RNA battalion succeeded in turning back a Maoist attack at the brigade level. The RNA had improved perimeter defenses around the headquarters. In the past, the Maoists have successfully used hooks to pull apart barbed wire defenses. In Jumla, however, the RNA had used double and triple strands of barbed wire that the Maoists had been unable to penetrate.

17. (C) The Maoists are not sincere about dialogue, Thapa asserted, adding the RNA had captured Maoist documents indicating that talks were to be used only as a ploy. Nonetheless, talks can be a good thing, he suggested, and the Government must remain open to them. Altogether, 16,000 Maoists have surrendered, he noted, but the Government still lacks an effective program for their rehabilitation. Right now, surrendered Maoists are put on parole, whence they frequently disappear. Thapa said he has raised with the Government the possibility of setting up rehabilitation camps, as had been operational in Sri Lanka. Such camps could also be a magnet to draw in others debating whether to surrender, he said.

COMMENT

18. (C) The business community, caught between frequent general strikes and even more frequent extortion demands, has been pleading with the RNA to augment its protection of key business and investment enterprises. The RNA, strapped for both human and financial resources, is clearly looking to the business community to fill at least part of the budgetary shortfall. Gen. Thapa's presentation is the first indication of any RNA enthusiasm we have heard for the concept of local militias. Clearly a village defense force is a difficult program to implement successfully for a variety of reasons, including caste and educational disparities, logistical factors, and security concerns. The RNA and the Government will have to plan very carefully how to train, equip, and employ this local militia, lest it become a hapless victim of the Maoists and a source of additional weapons for them. Other senior military leaders have told us that they have serious doubts about this proposal. When informed of the concept, IGP Shrestha of the APF quipped that it would be better to supply the villagers with cell phones (which Shrestha knows would not work in most of Nepal) than arms. What the Government most needs from the villagers is timely intelligence, Shrestha said.